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ABSURDITY, *ANGST* AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Duncan Pritchard

University of Edinburgh

ABSTRACT. In his seminal paper, ‘The Absurd’, Thomas Nagel sets out his conception of the problem of the meaning of life. In particular, he takes this problem to concern the potential *absurdity* of life, and he offers a persuasive account of what such absurdity might consist in. It is argued that Nagel confuses the *epistemological* problem of how one could gain a subjective guarantee that one’s life is meaningful with the *metaphysical* problem of whether one’s life is meaningful. It is thus concluded that the considerations that Nagel offers for thinking that one’s life is absurd establish, at best, merely the weaker conclusion that one necessarily lacks a subjective guarantee that one’s life is not absurd. Still, this conclusion is nonetheless philosophically important, since it suffices to ensure that a degree of *angst* regarding the meaningfulness of our lives is unavoidable.

0. In his seminal paper, ‘The Absurd’, Thomas Nagel (1970) offers a key insight into the problem of the meaning of life.¹ In particular, he sets out a certain conception of the absurd and then argues that there are good grounds for thinking that such absurdity applies to our own lives, thereby rendering them devoid of meaning. We will call the view that our lives are necessarily absurd, and hence meaningless, *absurdism*. I will be arguing that the conception of the absurd that Nagel sets out is indeed key to the problem of the meaning of life, and thus that an adequate resolution to the problem of the meaning of life must be able to demonstrate that absurdism is false. Nevertheless, I will not be following him in arguing that there are good grounds for absurdism. Instead, I will be suggesting that Nagel’s arguments in fact support a much weaker epistemological claim. Even so, the truth of this epistemological thesis ensures that a degree of *angst* regarding whether our lives are meaningful is unavoidable.

1. Nagel's paper opens by noting that some of the main reasons standardly given for absurdism are unpersuasive on closer inspection. He cites four such reasons. The first is that our existences will not matter a long time from now. He argues that if it is indeed true that nothing that we do now will matter in a million years then, "by the same token, nothing that will be the case in a million years matters now." (p49) In particular, he goes on, "it does not matter now that in a million years nothing we do now will matter." (*ibid.*)

The second ground for absurdism that he considers is that we are very small in comparison to the universe as a whole. Nagel notes that even if we were very large when compared to the universe as a whole—infinately large perhaps—it wouldn't follow from this fact alone that our lives are thereby any less absurd than they (putatively) are now. Nagel makes a similar point as regards the third ground for absurdism that he considers: that we are mortal. Suppose that one never died, and so lived forever. Would it follow that one's life would be any less absurd simply in virtue of *that*? It is hard to see why it would.

Finally, the fourth ground for absurdism that Nagel considers is the charge that the "chain of justification" is never resolved satisfactorily. The worry is that our lives are, at root, "an elaborate journey, leading nowhere" (p50). In support of this claim he notes that "one studies and works to earn money to pay for clothing, housing, entertainment, food, to sustain oneself from year to year, perhaps to support a family and pursue a career—but to what final end?" (*ibid.*) The concern is thus that a chain of justifications support the activities that make up our lives, but that this chain does not terminate in a satisfactory way. So, for example, one works so that one can get money, so that one can get access to certain amenities, so that one can get pleasure, and so on, without any element in this chain of justification being of a sort that could license the rest of the chain that it supports. Nagel's response to this argument is to note that since "justifications must come to an end somewhere, nothing is gained by denying that they end where they appear to, within life—or by trying to subsume the multiple, often trivial ordinary justifications of action under a single, controlling life scheme." (p51) We will return to consider Nagel's response to the fourth ground for absurdism in more detail presently.

2. After roundly rejecting these standard arguments for absurdism, Nagel goes on to consider what would count as a good ground for this thesis. The ordinary conception of absurdity is, he claims, one on which “there is a discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality” (*ibid.*), and he offers the famous example to illustrate this of being knighted just as one’s trousers fall down. For the most part, we live as if our lives are not generally absurd; as if, that is, there is not some general discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality that would make our lives absurd. According to Nagel, what the proponent of absurdism is trying to get us to realise is that this discrepancy is inevitably in play.

With this conception of absurdity in mind, Nagel argues that there are grounds for supposing that there is a general and inevitable discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality, and thus that our lives are absurd. The source of this discrepancy is the “collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt.” (pp51-2) That is, there is “always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives from which the seriousness [*in which we live our lives*] appears gratuitous.” (p52)

The perspective that Nagel has in mind is one in which we view our lives from a disengaged standpoint. We can get a grip on what this perspective involves by noting how Nagel sharply contrasts this standpoint with one in which one simply requests further steps in the chain of reasons (as with the fourth defence of absurdism considered above). In particular, he argues that the relevant step which leads to this disengaged standpoint is “not taken by asking for still another justification in the chain, and failing to get it.” (p53) Rather, what happens is that we “step back to find that the whole system of justifications and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that [...] we should not know how to defend without circularity.” (*ibid.*) The problem, then, is not the regress of justifications, but rather the fact that there is a perspective that we can take on our justifications which seems to demonstrate that they are not justifications at all.²

As Nagel makes clear, it is far from obvious how one is to adequately respond to this problem. Suppose, for example, that one tries to offer the required justification in terms of the role that one’s life plays within some greater good, such as by appealing to one’s

“service to society” or one’s role in some divine scheme (*ibid.*). The problem with these appeals, however, is that “a role in some larger enterprise cannot confer significance unless that enterprise is itself significant.” (*ibid.*) Moreover, “any such larger purpose can be put into doubt in the same way that the aims of an individual life can be, and for the same reasons.” (p54) That is, the crux of the matter is that the disengaged standpoint calls *any* justification into question, even a justification with a relative generality, like a justification that appeals to one’s role in a divine scheme. Absurdism looks unavoidable.

With the problem so construed, we can also diagnose why one might be tempted to think that such considerations as one’s mortality or relative size could constitute grounds for absurdism. For while such considerations do not motivate absurdism, it is unsurprising that by reflecting on our mortality, or our relatively tiny physical size (when compared to the cosmos as a whole), we might be led into adopting the disengaged standpoint from which it becomes clear that our lives are absurd.

3. One of the most interesting aspects of Nagel’s paper is the fact that he connects the problem of the meaning of life to the epistemological problem of radical scepticism, in that he claims that such scepticism also arises out of the adoption of a disengaged standpoint. In particular, he claims that in both cases one recognises that one’s justifications presuppose certain claims which cannot be themselves justified, at least without threat of circularity. Moreover, as before, this concern is brought out in contrast to a more mundane concern about the regress of justifications:

“In both cases the final, philosophical doubt is not contrasted with any unchallenged certainties, though it is arrived at by extrapolation from examples of doubt within the system of evidence or justification, where a contrast with other certainties is implied. In both cases our limitedness joins with a capacity to transcend those limitations in thought (thus seeing them as limitations, and as inescapable).” (p55)

According to Nagel, then, the epistemological counterpart of absurdism is thus radical scepticism, where both problems arise out of a recognition, when taking the disengaged standpoint, that one’s justifications, whether epistemic or more generally, are in fact not genuine justifications at all.

Whether this analogy between the problem of absurdity and epistemological scepticism is apt is an issue that I will return to.

4. Nagel thus offers some compelling grounds for supposing that absurdism is true, that absurdism is essentially the problem of the meaning of life, and that absurdism is related in interesting ways to the problem of epistemological scepticism. In the final sections of the paper, however, something strange happens. For while most of the article has been devoted to demonstrating that the problem posed by absurdism is *bona fide*, we now find Nagel hurriedly taking back much of what has gone before. As he puts it, our “absurdity warrants neither [...] distress nor [...] defiance.” (p58) And here we get his mysterious remarks that:

“If a sense of the absurd is a way of perceiving our true situation (even though the situation is not absurd until the perception arises), then what reason can we have to resent or escape it? Like the capacity for epistemological scepticism, it results from the ability to understand our human limitations. It need not be a matter for agony unless we make it so.” (p59)

But this is bizarre, for two reasons.

First, how can it be that one can recognise that one’s “true situation” is as the absurdist claims and yet merrily carry on as before? Indeed, Nagel’s final remark in this respect, that we should “approach our absurd lives with irony” (*ibid.*) further compounds the oddity of what is going on here. How would such an ironic approach to one’s own life work? More specifically, wouldn’t such an ironic approach merely *accentuate* the absurdity of one’s existence, rather than militate against it?

Second, another strange aspect of this passage is the claim that while when we recognise our “true situation” we realise that absurdism is true, it is nonetheless the case that our lives were “not absurd” until we perceived this to be the case. But that would seem to suggest that those who are ignorant of our “true situation” live lives which are not absurd, and that is very hard to understand. For if absurdism is indeed our “true situation”, then how can being ignorant of its truth insulate one from its implications?

5. Given that Nagel’s critical remarks in this regard do not hit home, what we are left with is the apparently compelling argument he presents for absurdism, a thesis which

devastatingly applies, it seems, regardless of whether one is aware of its truth and regardless of whether one chooses to continue in an ironic fashion after recognising its truth. It thus becomes imperative for us to find some way to block this argument, at least if we are to avoid the conclusion that our lives are absurd and hence meaningless. Fortunately, as we will now see, there is a crucial lacuna in Nagel's argument for absurdism, and hence he has not yet established this thesis.

Before we can demonstrate this, we first need to flesh-out Nagel's conception of the problem of the meaning of life. I take it that for Nagel this problem is essentially a problem of *value*. That is, what we seek is a concrete underpinning of the most fundamental values that make up our lives, since only then are our lives deserving of the seriousness that we invest in them. If these values are indeed just arbitrary, and hence not really valuable at all, then one's life is rendered devoid of the meaning that we ascribe to it in virtue of it exhibiting such (apparently genuine) values. The problem, then, as Nagel sees it, is that we recognise from the disengaged perspective that there is nothing underpinning these values, and it is from this fact that the absurdity arises.

We can bring this point out by considering the way in which we value things as part of our lives. In taking our lives seriously in the way that we do, we are thereby according the central defining components of our lives—their core goals and values—as being as important, and thus as valuable, as we treat them as being. If they lack the value that we ascribe to them, then it follows that there is indeed the kind of gap between pretension or aspiration and reality that Nagel argues is the mark of the absurd.

Take, for example, the miser, someone whose sole concern in life is in amassing money, something that he values for its own sake and so treats as precious. Such a life is clearly absurd in the intended sense, since money simply isn't valuable in the way that the miser supposes. In particular, money is not *finally* (i.e., non-instrumentally) valuable, but only instrumentally valuable (i.e., valuable as a means to some further good).³ Thus, there is a significant and fundamental gap between pretension and reality in the miser's life, and hence it is absurd.

The challenge posed by absurdism, however, is that what goes for the miser might well go for all of us. Suppose, for example, that nothing is finally valuable (or, at least, nothing that we value anyway). It would then follow that in treating anything as precious

and hence valuable for its own sake—whether friendship, say, or service to God—we are committing the same kind of error that the miser makes of treating something as being valuable for its own sake which isn't valuable in this way. More specifically, whatever goals and values are fundamental to our lives (in the way that money is fundamental to the miser's life), it would be impossible for them to be valuable in such a way as to accord our lives the seriousness which we attribute to them. Our lives would thus be absurd.

With this point about value in mind, we can formulate Nagel's argument for absurdism as being roughly as follows:

An Argument for Absurdism

- (P1) All meaningful lives involve fundamental goals and values which the agent concerned treats as finally valuable.
- (P2) But, it is necessarily the case that the fundamental goals and values of one's life are lacking in final value.
- (C1) So, there is an inevitable discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality.
- (C2) So, our lives are absurd, and hence meaningless.

While there might be some issues regarding the status of (P1)—we will consider one problem in particular in a moment—the key premise here is clearly (P2), and it is this premise which on our formulation Nagel is calling into question. In particular, what we discover when we adopt the disengaged perspective is that our lives do not warrant the seriousness which we invest in them precisely because the fundamental goals and values of our lives inevitably lack final value.

One advantage of this formulation of Nagel's argument is that it makes it explicit that the claim in play in absurdism is only that absurdity entails meaninglessness. In particular, this argument could fail, and absurdism be (in addition) false, and yet it still be the case that our lives are in their nature meaningless.⁴ After all, given that for one's life to be absurd it is essential that there is the relevant discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality, it follows that someone who is perfectly aware of the meaninglessness of their life would lead a life which was meaningless and yet not absurd. In order to see this, consider the case of Sisyphus, who was condemned to pointlessly push a boulder up a hill and then watch it roll back down again for all eternity. Since Sisyphus understands full well the horror of his predicament, there is no gap between pretension/aspiration and reality into which we could squeeze an accusation of absurdity, but that does not mitigate against the meaninglessness of his existence.⁵

More generally, there may be further conditions that one might want to impose on a meaningful life over and above the relevant fundamental goals and values being finally valuable, such as a specific kind of relationship between the agent and the goals/values in question. If, for instance, a life was devoted to a certain finally valuable end, and yet the agent's success at achieving that end was purely down to luck, then that might be thought relevant to the issue of whether that life is meaningful.⁶ In order to keep our discussion focussed, I will set complications like this aside in what follows. What is important for our purposes is only that this formulation of absurdism does indeed seem to capture what is *fundamentally* at issue in the problem of the meaning of life.

That this is what is fundamentally at issue in this debate can be seen by considering how different approaches to the problem of the meaning of life can be helpfully re-cast in terms of this axiological framework. Consider, for example, the debate between so-called 'internalists' and 'externalists' when it comes to the problem of the meaning of life—i.e., the debate between those who think that the solution to the problem resides in facts that are subjective to the agent, and those who think that it isn't. On the one hand, internalists, such as Harry Frankfurt (1982), argue that what is important to a meaningful life might just be that it involves the satisfaction of the agent's deepest desires. In contrast, an externalist might hold that such a subjective consideration could never be sufficient for a meaningful life. For example, one might, like Charles Taylor (1992, ch. 4), claim that the satisfaction of completely base and/or trivial desires can never confer meaning on a life.

By viewing the debate about the meaning of life through the lens of our argument for absurdism—and the crucial (P2) in particular—we can capture what is at issue here. For what the externalist is arguing, in effect, is that the relevant subjective factors—e.g., the deepest desires of the agent—are not sufficient to ensure that the fundamental goals and values of the agent's life are finally valuable. In contrast, the internalist can be read as claiming that such subjective factors *can* suffice to ensure that the fundamental goals and values of an agent's life are finally valuable. Indeed, as Frankfurt (1982) has himself argued, there is a kind of authenticity to a life led in conformity to one's deepest desires, and authenticity is certainly a trait that is often treated as finally valuable. In this way, even the completely 'fake' life of the agent in Robert Nozick's (1974, 42-5) 'experience

machine' may nonetheless exhibit the kind of properties to ensure that it meets the axiological requirement that we have laid down.

Re-casting this externalism-internalism debate in axiological terms clearly does not resolve it, since there are still substantive philosophical issues that require resolution (most notably whether the relevant target goods are finally valuable), but that we can re-cast this debate into these terms without loss is certainly a significant point in favour of this way of thinking of the problem of the meaning of life.

More generally, the axiological claim at issue in (P2) explains why nihilism about value is often thought to go hand-in-hand with scepticism about the meaning of life.⁷ On the view presented here the connection is immediate: if nothing is valuable then the fundamental goals and values of our lives are valueless, and hence absurdism is true.

Whereas the second premise of our argument for absurdism is able to capture various (ultimately axiological) intuitions we might have about the problem of the meaning of life, the first premise, (P1), is able to capture a different set of intuitions which is relevant in this regard concerning what pre-conditions need to be met in order to for a life to be in the market for meaning. For example, while the problem of free will is not normally discussed in tandem with the problem of the meaning of life, there is clearly a connection between the two debates in the sense that the possibility of free will is clearly a pre-condition for life to have meaning. We can account for this point in terms of (P1) by noting how a lack of free will simply prevents one's life from having the relevant goals and values that are needed for one's life to be in the market for meaning. More generally, by reflecting on what it takes for a life to have fundamental goals and values we can determine further more specific pre-conditions that a life must meet in order to be potentially meaningful. After all, even if there is no metaphysical problem of free will, this does not mean that one's particular life instantiates this freedom to a sufficient degree such that it can be said to have fundamental goals and values. Heteronomy, no less than a metaphysical lack of freedom, can be a potential barrier to meaningfulness.⁸

Still, one might be worried that (P1) unduly excludes certain answers to the problem of the meaning of life. The obvious case in this regard is Pyrrhonian scepticism. Unlike most forms of epistemological scepticism, Pyrrhonian scepticism is meant to be an ethical stance, in that to completely live the disengaged life of the Pyrrhonian sceptic, whereby one assents to nothing (nothing which isn't self-evident anyway), is thereby to live the good

life. Now imagine an agent living the Pyrrhonian life, and thereby attaining *eudaimonia* (or at least *ataraxia* anyway). Wouldn't such a life be at least in the running to be counted as meaningful? One would think so, and yet *ex hypothesi* this is a life which lacks any goals or values. Now one might think that such a life of non-engagement is psychologically impossible, and thus that the view is in this sense self-defeating. Conversely, one might hold that insofar as the view is not self-defeating then the life of a Pyrrhonian must be consistent with fundamental goals and values of some description. Clearly, however, if either of these defensive routes fails, then we have a genuine problem on our hands with regard to (P1).⁹

Still, (P1) holds a great deal of plausibility, and hence we ought to be able to legitimately set this concern to one side here. What is important for our purposes is just that this argument for absurdism does seem to capture both what Nagel was striving for in his remarks on the absurd while also accommodating a number of key intuitions we have about the problem of the meaning of life. The critical question that I want to tackle in the remainder of this paper is whether Nagel offers any good grounds for thinking that this argument for absurdism goes through. In particular, I want to examine whether he does make a sound case for the pivotal (P2). I will be suggesting that he doesn't.

6. To begin with, notice that while (P2) is an axiological/metaphysical claim, the conclusion that Nagel directly argues for is explicitly *epistemological*. In order to see this, let us look again at Nagel's argument for absurdism.

Recall that Nagel argues that there are grounds for supposing that there is a general and inevitable discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality, and thus that our lives are absurd. The source of this discrepancy, he claims, is the "collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt." (pp51-2) That is, there is "always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives from which the seriousness [*in which we live our lives*] appears gratuitous." (p52) This perspective involves viewing our lives from a disengaged standpoint, such that we "step back to find that the whole system of justifications and criticism, which controls our

choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that [...] we should not know how to defend without circularity.” (*ibid.*)

Translated into our axiological framework, Nagel’s claim is that there is a perspective relative to which one recognises that, necessarily, one is unable to offer adequate (i.e., non-circular) grounds for supposing that the fundamental goals and values of one’s life are finally valuable. We will assess the truth of this claim in a moment, but the first thing to note about it is that it is an epistemological claim, one which falls short of the axiological/metaphysical claim at issue in (P2). After all, that such reasons are lacking (relative to this ‘disengaged’ perspective anyway) for holding that the fundamental goals and values of our lives are finally valuable is quite compatible with such fundamental goals and values actually being finally valuable. Paradoxically, then, Nagel’s epistemological conception of the absurd is in fact compatible, in principle at least, with our lives not actually being absurd at all.

Interestingly, this point casts light on the odd remarks that Nagel makes about how we should be willing to embrace the (as he sees it) absurdity of our lives. Recall that he claims that recognising our “true situation” (p59) in this way “warrants neither [...] distress nor [...] defiance” (p58) since, like the problem of epistemological scepticism, it simply reveals our “human limitations.” (p59) These remarks are odd since if one grants that from this perspective one has indeed recognised one’s “true situation” then it follows that one’s life is absurd. To recognise this and yet carry on regardless—presumably adopting, recall, the ironic approach that Nagel advises—seems like mere bad faith.

Now that we have distinguished Nagel’s epistemological claim from the axiological/metaphysical thesis at issue in (P2), however, we can see the source of Nagel’s confusion on this score. What we discover from the disengaged perspective is, at best, only an epistemic lack, and thus nothing immediately follows for absurdism itself. It would be incoherent to recognise the truth of (P2) and continue living one’s life in the same manner as before (or at least ironically), but it isn’t obviously incoherent to recognise the truth of the epistemological thesis and continue as before (albeit ironically). In short, the “true situation” that we recognise from this perspective is at most that Nagel’s epistemological thesis is true, and not that (P2), and hence absurdism, is true.

So once we recognise the specifically epistemological nature of Nagel's claim, then it becomes clear why he is so sanguine about the problem of the absurd that he claims to identify. Indeed, the source of such apparently unwarranted optimism in the face of this problem becomes even more comprehensible once we make clear just how specific the epistemic lack that Nagel identifies is. For notice that the epistemic lack in question merely concerns the fact that there is a perspective relative to which it is *dubitable* that the fundamental goals and values of our life have final value. But mere dubitability surely does not suffice by anyone's lights to show that we lack an epistemic basis for believing that the fundamental goals of values of our lives have final value. Remember, after all, that Nagel is quite clear that the problem here is not the regress of justifications. Accordingly, he explicitly allows that there may be an entirely appropriate terminus to the epistemic regress of reasons that we can supply in support of this belief. With that in mind, it ought to be possible, by Nagel's lights, for us to actually *know* that the fundamental goals and values of our lives have final value, even despite the fact that such a belief is dubitable.

Once this point is made clear, then it makes much more sense to suppose that we can ironically continue living our lives even after recognising this epistemic lack on our parts. After all, for much of what we believe—indeed, perhaps all that we believe—there is a similar epistemic lack of a subjective guarantee, and hence the epistemic lacuna that Nagel has identified is far from remarkable on this score.

Still, even though this demand is extremely severe, given how important it is to us that our lives have meaning it is not implausible that we should want our beliefs in this regard to meet this high epistemic standard. Moreover, Nagel is surely right that we are unable to meet this standard, as regards *any* belief (any belief in a significant proposition at any rate). The result is that we are inevitably subject to a degree of *angst* regarding whether our lives are meaningful.

Once we understand the nature of the epistemic demand in play here, I think it becomes clearer why Nagel thinks that there is a sense in which the problem of radical scepticism is insoluble and also why he maintains that when it comes to both the problem of the meaning of life and the problem of radical scepticism the issue is not merely the potential regress of reasons. The first point follows immediately from the austere epistemic demand in play. If what we want in response to the problem of scepticism is a subjective

guarantee that we are not radically deceived, then this is not going to be forthcoming. A general epistemic *angst* of some degree is thus unavoidable.¹⁰

The second point follows once we recognise that the unavailability of reasons of this very specific sort is entirely compatible with there being supporting reasons available. Just as the fact that one can rationally call into question the final value of something does not by itself entail that one lacks good grounds for supposing that this fundamental goal is finally valuable, so that one can question any ground that is offered in favour of a belief does not itself entail that the belief is ungrounded. By the same token, however, it follows that epistemological scepticism, on Nagel's conception, is actually compatible with a generally good epistemic standing for one's beliefs (indeed, it is compatible with widespread knowledge of what one believes). The epistemic *angst* that is warranted by Nagel's arguments thus concerns a very specific lacuna in our epistemic standing.¹¹

7. *Contra* Nagel, then, the possibility of the disengaged perspective that he describes does not suffice to give us reason to think that absurdism is true, since this thesis in fact depends on further substantive issues, such as the existence and nature of final value. Nevertheless, reflecting on Nagel's contribution to this debate does highlight a way of thinking about these problems such that we can gain a better grip on what is really at issue and why. Moreover, what Nagel does demonstrate is the unavoidability of a certain kind of specifically epistemic *angst* regarding whether our lives are meaningful, an *angst* which reflects a general unavoidable epistemic limitation.¹²

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NOTES

¹ In what follows, page numbers are given to the 1987 reprint of this paper. For an excellent survey of recent work on the problem of the meaning of life, see Metz (2002). See also Metz (2007).

² The philosophical implications of the disengaged perspective is, of course, a recurring *motif* in Nagel's work. See especially Nagel (1986).

³ For two classic discussions of final (as opposed to specifically intrinsic) value, see Korsgaard (1983) and Rabinowicz & Roennow-Rasmussen (1999; cf. Rabinowicz & Roennow-Rasmussen 2003). For scepticism about final value (at least insofar as final value is distinct from intrinsic value), see Bradley (2002). For a recent discussion of the problem of the meaning of life which appeals to final value, see Brogaard & Smith (2005).

⁴ Although it's not entirely clear what Nagel's view is in this regard, in places he does seem to want to say that the problem posed by absurdism just is the problem of the meaning of life. If that's the correct way to read him, then he is simply mistaken on this score.

⁵ Note that I am not necessarily disagreeing with Camus (1955) on this score. This is because Camus imagines Sisyphus as *embracing* his fate, while I am imagining him as being simply *resigned* to it (I do not

take a stand here on which interpretation is the best one to take). If what it means to embrace one's fate in this way is to accord one's life as deserving of the kind of seriousness that Nagel has in mind (and I think it must), then Camus's Sisyphus is living an absurd life, just as Camus suggests.

⁶ The idea that a meaningful life exhibits a certain structure, with both internal aspects (such as appropriate motivational states) and external aspects (such as finally valuable fundamental goals successfully attained through one's own efforts), is a common, though far from uncontentious, theme in contemporary accounts of the meaning of life. For discussion of proposals of this general sort, see Kekes (1986; 2000), Brogaard & Smith (2005) and Levy (2005).

⁷ The most obvious example in this respect is of course Nietzsche, in his later works at least. See especially Nietzsche (1968).

⁸ Indeed, even when the fundamental goals and values of one's life are not imposed by an external force, this may yet not suffice to put one's life in the market for meaning. For example, suppose one is psychologically alienated from these goals and values, such that one is for instance internally conflicted about pursuing them, and hence feels distanced from them. The reason why such alienation could be a barrier to a meaningful life is that in such a case these goals and values are not really 'owned' by one at all, and hence are not really one's fundamental goals and values. As one might put the point, the absence of heteronomy does not suffice for autonomy. Nietzsche famously argued—e.g., in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche 1969)—that a quite extreme form of alienation of this sort was in fact the norm for most subjects, and hence that free will was an illusion. For an excellent discussion of this aspect of Nietzsche's thinking, see Gemes (2008).

⁹ I discuss Pyrrhonian scepticism and its bearing on this debate in more detail in Pritchard (*forthcoming*; cf. Pritchard 2000).

¹⁰ I discuss epistemic *angst* of this sort in its own right in Pritchard (2005b). See also Pritchard (2005a, *passim*). Given the analogy of the disengaged perspective that Nagel appeals to, a more appropriate term to describe this epistemic unease might be epistemic *vertigo*.

¹¹ This point highlights just how unusual Nagel's conception of epistemological scepticism is. For more on Nagel's account of epistemological scepticism, see Nagel (1986). For a survey of recent work on the topic of radical scepticism, see Pritchard (2002). For a recent defence of a construal of radical scepticism which, like Nagel's treatment, argues in effect that we should focus our attentions on the sceptical problem as it afflicts an austere conception of epistemic standing, see Pritchard (2008).

¹² An earlier version of this paper was presented at the University of Edinburgh Philosophy Society in 2008. My research into this area has been supported by the award of a Philip Leverhulme Prize.